Meditations on the Multiple: On Plural Subjectivity and Gender in Recent New Media Art Practice

Jillian Hernandez

Sept. 8, 71

I have no identity.

I have an approximate mathematical Identity (birthchart.)

I have several names*.

I $\underline{\text{will}}$ give up my (search for) identity As a deadend investi-Gation.

I will make myself empty To receive cosmic info.

I <u>will</u> renounce the artist's Ego, the supreme test without Which battle a human could not Become "of knowledge."

I $\underline{\text{will}}$ be human first, artist Second.

I will not seek fame, publicity, or suckcess.

Identity changes continuously as Multiplied by time. (identity is a Vector.)

*On roof after I write this, Cindy tells me that "Lozano (the name) snapped off."



 ${\it C'mon\ Baltimore, Everybody\ Suz-ercise!}, 2010, Susan\ Lee-Chun, still\ of\ public\ performance\ in\ Baltimore, MD$

In this text I revisit a multi-venue exhibition I co-curated with Susan Richmond, a professor of Art History at Georgia State University and independent curator Cathy Byrd. Losing Yourself in the 21st Century explored

how contemporary women artists articulate notions of gendered subjectivity through new media in a social context where notions of a singular and stable self are constantly undermined through the now widespread negotiation of multiple identities that people experience online. [1] We developed a blog that was utilized as a call for participation for the exhibition and also as a platform through which we could engage in dialogue with the artists and for the artists to respond to each other's work. The blog also served as a particularly useful tool for a feminist project such as Losing Yourself, as it afforded transparency to the collaborative curatorial process. We selected thirteen artists to feature in exhibitions at the Welch Gallery at Georgia State University in Atlanta (October-December 2009) and Maryland Art Place in Baltimore (February-March 2010). The artists included were Ali Prosch, Susan Lee Chun, Katherine Behar, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Amber Hawk Swanson, Noelle Mason, Saya Woolfalk, kate hers, Shana Moulton, Amber Boardman, Stacia Yeapanis, Renetta Sitoy, and Milana Braslavsky.

Most of the artists in the show troubled conventional notions of selfhood as authentic and knowable not through obliteration, but through proliferation. Ali Prosch performed as and interacted with three different versions of "herself" in *Match*; Katherine Behar multiplied and cloned her body in *Pipecleaner* the screensaver; and kate hers performed as both herself and an anonymous pregnant schoolgirl in her video/street intervention *Noh-Chim*. Other artists in the exhibition such as Amber Hawk Swanson, Susan Lee Chun, and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum also proliferated themselves as doubles, triples, clones, and alter-egos.

How does gender shape these strategies of multiplication? What are the implications for how we think the nexus of feminism, identity, embodiment, and the contingent implementation of digital art practice? Perhaps contemporary women-identified artists find perverse assemblages of subjectivity and subjectlessness productive for cultural critique; amalgams of bodies, intensities, sensations, and affects that disturb the coherence of any one self. [2] I will engage these questions through a fragmented format that includes dialogue from the Losing Yourself blog and e-mail exchanges with the artists. Rather than develop and defend an argument, I am interested in presenting and mediating this material in order to provoke thoughts and theories in the reader, and will articulate my speculations and meditations throughout the text. This methodology privileges multivocality by foregrounding the ideas of the artists.

Irigaray and Plural Female Subjectivity

Before discussing the Losing Yourself projects in detail, I would like to bring the work of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray into the discussion to help frame the issue of gender and subjectivity. One of Irigaray's major claims is that "woman" is in the process of becoming. Women have not been able to know themselves due to the dominance of phallocentrism in language, which hinders the articulation of sexual difference, making masculinity the "one" gender identity. Women can only express themselves with the linguistic tools developed in phallocentric culture. Without having access to her own subjectivity, woman has served as the "other" that affirms man's notion of (him)self. The implication here is that women have never had a self to lose in the first place, as the position of self has been the privileged locus of phallocentric subjectivity and power.

This appears to have been understood by American artist Lee Lozano in the untitled conceptual text piece of 1971 that I quote at the beginning of this text, which expresses the futility of a search for a "true" or "core" self/identity. Lozano is known for her self-imposed ban on speaking to women that began in the same year and was planned to last for one month and instead continued until she died in 1999. Lozano's boycott of women has perplexed art critics, and various speculations have been advanced about her reasons for doing so, including her alleged desire to align herself with men in the art world in order to benefit from their dominant position, or because she felt alienated by feminism. I posit that Lozano profoundly realized how it is impossible for women to speak, even to each other, in the context of phallocentric culture and that she decided to remove herself from the corrupt politics of what scholar Gayle Rubin has termed the "sex/gender system," just as she removed herself from the politics of the New York art world in Dropout Piece in 1970.

Irigaray's notion that the singular self is a product and inheritance of male domination presents the possibility that woman's subjectivity can be theorized as critically perverse and multiple, not the "one" of phallocentric power but as "at least two" that is in the process of becoming. In her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" she develops the metaphor of vaginal lips to theorize female subjectivity as multiple. Lips are two pieces of flesh always in a state of touching, neither open nor closed. In "When Our Lips Speak Together" Irigaray employs an experimental mode of writing that generates multiple voices to disrupt the syntax of phallocentric language and to allow for alternative, feminist productions of meaning. In the following passage she evokes the plurality of female subjectivity,

"Open your lips: don't open them simply. I don't open them simply. We—you/I—are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: a single word cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct." [3]

Being "always several at once" can allow feminized subjects to speak and act their identities beyond the confines of phallocentrism. Irigaray has been criticized for posing essentialist claims about female subjectivity that are grounded in a normative female body. However, in Irigaray's work the body is a tool for thinking, not a biological truth that can unlock the core of a female self. The "woman" she addresses in her work can be any feminized subject (which can include queer men). She has discussed how phallocentric language has facilitated male "self-affection" through the affirmation of their privileged subjectivity. Scholar Carolyn Burke describes "When Our Lips Speak Together" as an imagined discourse for female lovers that troubles the status of men as self same and the standard of sameness at the expense of female self-knowledge. [4] In conjuring the sensuous lips that inspire her essay Irigaray performs female self-affection. She writes,

"What we would want to put into play, then, is a syntax that would make woman's 'self-affection' possible. A "self-affection" that would certainly not be reducible to the economy of the sameness of the One, and for which the syntax and the meaning remain to be found." [5]

In this passage we find Irigaray foregrounding the indeterminacy of female subjectivities, not positing an essentialist argument. Although much theoretical work on female subjectivity has been published long after Irigaray's text (originally published in 1977), I find her notions of plurality and self-affection uniquely provocative for thinking the multiplicity of female selves in the Losing Yourself in the 21st Century exhibition. Although few of the artists in the exhibition relate their work directly to feminism, how can we understand the ways in which the multiple female bodies and voices in their work articulate meanings that disrupt phallocentric understandings of self? What are the pleasures and pains that attend their production of multiple subjects?

Danger Zones: Performing the Gendered & Racialized Body





Match, 2009, Ali Prosch, live multi-media performance including video projection, audio, costumes, props, colored lights, dimensions variable, © Ali Prosch.

Self-affection and engagement with plural female selves is not inherently pleasurable. Through various warm-ups, costume changes, and rounds of boxing, spectators watched as Los Angeles-based artist Ali Prosch embodied and performed differing versions of herself and witnessed the violent, exhausting, and painful struggle of critical self assessment, which often entails encountering oneself as an antagonistic other. Prosch presented a performance for the Losing Yourself exhibition at Georgia State University titled Match, in which she engaged in a grueling 12-minute boxing fight with a large-scale projection of herself.

Prosch staged the performance as a spectacular event. The room was darkened to highlight the glow sticks strewn throughout the floor, strings of pulsating

lights, projections of fireworks, and smoke. The performance space also included a rack on which hung the costumes she donned for various phases of the performance—the intro where she sang <code>Danger Zone</code>, a song made popular by the film <code>Top Gun</code> (1986); the warm up period; and the match itself. During the fight, Prosch and her projected egos heckled each other and called each other bitches. At times the dynamics being performed were humorous, at others, disturbing, especially as <code>Prosch's</code> body was showing signs of stress and exhaustion.





Match, 2009, Ali Prosch, live multi-media performance including video projection, audio, costumes, props, colored lights, dimensions variable, @ Ali Prosch.

Jillian Hernandez: Ali, I was thinking about Match a lot in the days after it was performed. When we first talked about the project, I thought it was a great, even comical idea. Various Alis duking it out in amazing costumes. For me, the concept very much stayed at the level of irony and humor. There was serious content there as far as your exploration of self-conflict, but the staging of it, the lights, rugs, costumes, made it seem as if the performance was something ironically theatrical, and not really personal. However, once

you started singing <code>Danger Zone</code> and I could hear the nervousness in your voice, I realized just how vulnerable you were making yourself. I also had similar feelings during the fight scene, some parts were hilarious to me, and I wanted to make sure that you could hear me laughing because the audience was so silent, and not giving off much energy for you to work with. At other times though, I wanted it to end. There were moments where the actions seemed to take you somewhere outside the realm of performance and somewhere in (or outside) yourself, Ali, the artist, and it seemed really painful. Were you in a "<code>Danger Zone</code>"? What have your thoughts been about the performance, now two years later? How would you describe the interactions between your subjectivity as Ali the person/artist and those projected Alis who were your enemies?

Ali Prosch: At the time, I was into ideas of the self, specifically the idea of a "true" self. I think we have several selves and they are all as "real" as the next. If everything is constructed through language, e.g. gender, nature, religion, identity, then I wanted to question the idea of authenticity. I created a multiphase performance to touch upon all of this. I moved in and out of the different characters and phases: Ali the performer, Ali—the artist, Ali—the fighter, Ali—the woman, Ali—the limited body.

I didn't necessarily consider my projected selves as my enemies. They were all part of me, conflicts included. I wasn't interested in creating a hierarchy amongst the different selves. Rather, reflect on how people move in and out of personas on a daily basis and investigate how context and environment produces that shift. We perform ourselves everyday and I intended for the live costume changes and theatricality to represent this. Singing to Kenny Loggin's Danger Zone (1986) and then warming up to the Rocky theme song (1976) also became a means of inserting comedy, irony, and self-effacement into the performance itself.

More than a year later, I now realize how incredibly intense the piece was and how displaying that type of vulnerability may have been too much for the audience. I think it could have been so severe that I actually isolated them. I wanted people to react, have a visceral experience, laugh and be affected. I think it was so personal and awkward at times that the audience just froze and didn't react at all. Somewhere along the lines, it seemed that they were conflicted between a "right" and "wrong" response. I wanted the piece to challenge the parameters of performance art, but I definitely didn't want to alienate the group. In hindsight, if I were to re-perform the piece, it would be quite different. I would remove the first two phases and just hold the boxing match with myself for as long as I possibly could, further pushing the element of physical endurance and the intensity of the body in motion. I would also make my projected selves larger than life—to the point of absurdity, 50 feet high on the side of a building. [6]

Perhaps the silence was productive. The affective intensity of the performance could have confounded the compulsory desire to articulate a proper or improper reaction, creating a disturbance in language through affect. Prosch's performance can be thought of as presenting not just an event so uncomfortable and spectacular that the spectator is stunned silent, but also as presenting an opportunity for the viewers to meditate and lose themselves, or think the multiplicity of themselves through the performance. The incapacity of language for articulating the pleasures and pains of "being subject" are also explored by Berlin-based artist kate hers in her film Noh-Chim, which documents her personal search for origins in Korea.



Noh-Chim (missing), 2005-2006, kate hers, digital video-social intervention, Seoul, Korea, © 2006

Unlike many adoptee narratives that work from a notion of reunification of the self with one's biological family, the artist's juxtaposition of archival footage and documentation of her street performances as a pregnant school girl in Seoul, express how returning home can sometimes further dislodge an already tenuous sense of self. The video opens with a shot of the artist compulsively stuffing crackers into her mouth. This scene is followed by footage of her appearance on a Korean television program that allows people to search for people from their past (which includes adoptees searching for their biological parents), shots of archival photographs of Korean orphans, and documentation of her street performances. The video rejects the conventional documentary format in favor of fragmented scenes of antisocial behavior, failed translations, and depictions of corporeal excess. Below is a segment of dialogue that was posted on the Losing Yourself blog that addresses the issue of subjectivity and language. [7]

JillianH

April 22nd, 2009 at 8:55 pm

Hi Kate, I'm thinking about the commonalities and divergences in how you approach the issue of transnational identity and adoption and how they are dealt with in films such as Daughter from Danang and First Person Plural. There is something of an emotional excess or spectacle that is foregrounded in these works, primarily in the form of the weeping female body. In your work, however, emotional and corporeal excess seems to be displayed via eating and laughing. The manner in which you approach it seems aimed at provoking the feeling of displacement in the viewer/spectator. Also, is translation, via language and emotion, something you are exploring and troubling? I am thinking about moments in the film in which spoken English has English subtitles, and moments in which the viewers realizes that more than one "voice" is addressing them.

Thank you for sharing your work, Jillian

kate hers

July 6th, 2009 at 9:38 pm

i was very pleased and excited with your responses to my work. i think directly or indirectly my work for the last several years has taken up language as a medium and intended to interrogate my position as a speaking subject. Bound up with language is of course translation, whose translation, who is being translated, and whose voice is translating. it's probably more

evident in my last work called das deutschsprachliche projekt in which i refused to speak english for 3 months and only communicated in german while living in berlin and zürich. i consider NOH-CHIM to be intimately connected to much of what i continue to engage. it's a piece which is highly personal and functions quite differently—i believe as "high art"—because of my critical investment (at least at that time) in being Korean, and so the distance needed to appreciate the work on my part took a while. i am familiar with those other filmic works about transracial adoption and while i agree that they deal with the excess of spectacle, i think those spectacles exist in exploiting a traditional narrative. i think these pieces are interesting as documentaries but my intention as artist is different and perhaps even subversive. i am more interested in a critique of my subject position, as a mirrored Other.



Noh-Chim (missing), 2005-2006, kate hers, digital video-social intervention, Seoul, Korea, © 2006

I recently asked kate hers more questions about the role of the body in her work, in particular the persona of the pregnant schoolgirl that she performed in Seoul. I interpreted this body as symbolizing her mourning for a lost Korean identity but instead hers stated that the performance was addressing the missing bodies of pregnant teens that are hidden away to avoid family shame. hers's street intervention made visible the exportation of Korean infants for adoption that is silenced in public discourse. In our exchange she shared her thoughts on using the body in her work and how it has been influenced by cultural context.

December 27, 2011

kate hers: Since I have been in Germany I have lessened the use of my own body
in my work because I recognize how the racialization and codification of not
only an Asian body, but an Asian female body works against a sophisticated
reading or multilayered interpretation of my work. I suppose that what Kandice
Chuh speaks of, what you paraphrase in your email—"the critical necessity of
abandoning notions of a 'knowable' and stable ethnic 'Asian' or 'Asian
American' subjectivity" is the goal, but I have unfortunately comprehended
that it can only be dreamt of in a culture (perhaps not yet in Germany) in
which the notion of identity of nationality, culture, race, and ethnicity (and

also gender) can be recognized simultaneously as being separate and elaborately bound together, in which positions and constellations can be made visible and discussed without being accused of racism. That being said, it's a strange situation for me to be so engaged in such ideas in my work and to not have found an audience to communicate with, to the extent I wish to in the country where I live. The fight against essentialization of identity can be misread as a rejection of one's own culture—it's so annoying. Because at the same time I don't want to represent all of Asia (-American), I don't want Asia or Asian culture to be invisible either. So I'm grappling with mediums at the moment! [8]

Although the performing body can at times trouble linguistic structures, for racialized subjects the body often reaffirms notions of otherness. Artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum also engages with the racialized body and transnational experience. Her video in the Losing Yourself exhibition, A Short History: Starring Asme as Herself, depicts three iterations of the artist's body interacting in a landscape of lush woods. The figures orbit around each other as they blow animated clouds of air from their mouths and receive and consume the air from one another. In the e-mail below I ask Sunstrum about the doubling and tripling of her likeness in the work.

A Short History: Starring Asme as Herself, 2007, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, animation (1min:36sec), Copyright Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum.

Jillian Hernandez: In A Short History: Starring Asme as Herself you interact with various versions of yourself and in more recent multimedia works such as A Small(ish) Opera you also depict yourself as multiple. What work does this doubling and tripling of the body do for your projects?

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum: I think one of the main reasons why I invented the alter ego Asme was because I needed a character who could embody an idea of the multiple self. I think in the increasingly transnational experience of many contemporary Africans, it is common to find oneself operating between cultures, traveling across several geographies, and straddling multiple social and political identities. So, in this way, the double or triple body stands in literally for those multiple selves. In my more recent work, such as A Small(ish) Opera, I have tried to expand the multiple self to also embody fantasy-based or mythologically-driven experiences. Lately, the multiple selves become various cosmic, cross-dimensional, or even spiritual iterations of a body.

 ${\it JH}$: Do you think that utilizing digital media affords artists with more possibilities for challenging traditional notions of identity? If so, in what ways?

PPS: I think meaning is tied quite closely to the medium in the case of digital media. For me, using digital processes such as sound, animation, and digital photography allows me to address notions pertaining to identity in somewhat non-conventional ways. I think there is an immediacy and a certain "sharpness" to digital media that instantly conjures a current or even a futuristic moment. In my work this process is significant because it allows me a platform for honest, specific, and challenging commentary on my own experience of blackness—an experience of always shifting between definitions and boundaries; of skirting around and undercutting expectations and assumptions. [9]

Sunstrum's account of how digital media uniquely affords the articulation of the movement and shifting of identities by conjuring presentness and futurity is fruitful for thinking the multiple subject as unfixed and becoming. There is a politics to the digital. It is not just a play of identity that is facilitated by technology, but more importantly modes of communicating how gendered and racialized subjects escape and are in excess of normative structures. Methods of the digital utilized by cultural workers like Sunstrum provide alternatives to more dominant digital practices and representations generated by the mass media, gaming industry, and dominant social networking platforms that reify hierarchies of gender and race. [10]

Digital Feminist Interventions



Amber Doll, 2007, Amber Hawk Swanson, C-print, © Amber Hawk Swanson.

Discussing Amber Hawk Swanson's work in Losing Yourself returns us to Irigaray's notions of female multiple subjectivity and self-affection, as the artist fell in love with her double. In The Amber Doll Project, Swanson replicated herself by having a life- size doll made in her likeness that she placed in various public contexts in an exploration of how the female body is viewed and treated as an object, especially when it is perceived as having no agency. The artist's documentation of the public's reaction to Amber Doll shows how the violence and sexual abuse of the female body continues to be naturalized and culturally sanctioned in a "post-feminist," "post-equality"

Jillian Hernandez: I recall you speaking about how The Amber Doll Project emerged from your interaction with a community of men online who use RealDolls. Can you tell me about how this online communication fed into your concept for the project?

Amber Hawk Swanson: After completing the Feminism? Project which involved imaging myself in provocatively sexual contexts during reenactments of a variety of women's definitions of feminism—I was lonely and seeking the companionship of a girlfriend but not yet out as queer. I read about Davecat in the Salon.com article "Just like a woman" and through it discovered an online forum maintained by a community of what others have termed "hetero-outsider men" who own or desire life-like sex dolls—RealDolls made of a PVC skeleton and silicone flesh and penetrable in three orifices. Aware of my own failed attempts at dating real women (termed "organics" on the forum), I felt an affinity with a subgroup of the community who described themselves as "doll husbands," and considered themselves partnered with their RealDolls. Inspired by the fulfillment they found in their relationships with what they termed "synthetics" over "organics," I ordered a RealDoll of my own.

Impossible to keep my personal relationship with my doll separate from my interest in using her as a prop, The Amber Doll Project became a lived-performance with two categories of output: 1.) the raw snapshots, video diaries, and correspondence that documented our falling into and out of love alongside the growing difference in our bodies as I gained weight and she remained the same. And 2.) our collaborative conceptual photographs, video vignettes, and interactive installations questioning agency and objectification. The project as a whole, and my personal experience falling into and out of love with Amber Doll, were certainly influenced by interactions with other doll owners/lovers.

 ${\it JH:}$ Instead of using a generic RealDoll, what prompted you to utilize one in your own image? What did you believe this doubling of yourself would bring to the piece?

AHS: I originally acquired Amber Doll as a prop for my work and academic interests— the fact that she also became the companion I desired in my personal life came later. The Feminism? Project received a degree of attention in Chicago's art world that corresponded with a compelling dialogue about the videos. In addition to the dialogue surrounding the project, I received unwanted sexual attention as a result of having imaged myself sexually and publicly. I also received a number of stories of sexual assault from both women and men who had encountered my videos. Unprepared for both, but especially the stories, I began reading about sexual assault and the compulsion to reenact trauma. I kept reading the words "victim" and "victimizer" which seemed to exist on two ends of a spectrum that described violence in the readings I was encountering. I found myself interested in the way those two words overlap. Though problematic, on a conceptual level I had the interest in merging them, and as a performer I wanted to embody them simultaneously. I was looking for two things when I ordered Amber Doll in my image, 1.) a receptacle for unwanted sexual attention, and 2.) a realistic body double that allows me to embody victim/victimizer simultaneously. Looking back, I'm still a little unclear about all of the meanings I was pursuing in the work. Much of it was led by intuition and has only now come into clearer focus with my new work transforming Amber Doll's severely damaged body into a small replica of the bull orca, Tilikum, who lives in captivity at SeaWorld Orlando and has been involved in the deaths of three people.



Amber Doll > Tilikum, 2011, Amber Hawk Swanson, C-print, © Amber Hawk Swanson.

JH: I am fascinated with your *Tilikum* project, especially the way in which a "damaged" female body transforms into an animal body, one that is in captivity and exploited. In other words, both bodies treated as objects in different ways. Are you trying to articulate this parallel in the project? What prompted you to make a whale body Amber Doll's new incarnation?

AHS: In 2010 when Tilikum killed a trainer at SeaWorld I paid attention to the way the incident was represented in the media. It seemed Tilikum was both easy to sympathize with as a captive and easy to blame as a violent killer. I began reading about ambiguous perpetrators and provocative victims and something clicked between my previous work with Amber Doll and the ways in which I was understanding our societal response to Tilikum. People close to my art practice have described the new Amber Doll > Tilikum work as a way for Amber Doll to bite back after the abuse she endured over the course of our earlier work together. I think this is absolutely part of the work, as is the parallel between Amber Doll's damaged female body and Tilikum's captive and exploited body. Additionally, I've had artistic interests in acts perceived as revenge and moments when the subject of our sympathy flips unexpectedly. Lately, I've been interested in hearing how Tilikum's former trainers-turned activistsinterpret the work. I was delighted when former Sea World trainers got in touch with me during the recent transformation. Their ideas about the work incorporate new perspectives based on their experiences at SeaWorld and in a community of marine mammal activists. Some of their thoughts are included in our Livestreamed conversation during the performance. [11]



Amber Doll > Tilikum, 2011, Amber Hawk Swanson, C-print, © Amber Hawk Swanson.

The evolution of *The Amber Doll Project*, which connected a queer woman artist exploring feminism with hetero-outsider men, and resulted in digital marine mammal activism, demonstrates the political potential of new media art practice. This evolution was sparked, like many of the other *Losing Yourself* projects, by the artist's attempts at self-affection, at utilizing multiple voices and selves to engage the vicissitudes of gendered subjectivity. We have explored not only the positive aspects of plural subjectivity's challenge to phallocentric notions of self and gender, but also the physical and emotional ordeals that addressing these multiple subjects entails. The work of the artists in *Losing Yourself in the 21st Century* present us with female bodies we can see but never know—there are too many to keep track of and it is impossible to determine which one of them is real. The multiplied female subject unhinges our hold on self/knowledge, making identity a medium for transformation and becoming.

Jillian Hernandez is a Ph.D candidate in the Women's and Gender Studies department at Rutgers University and an independent curator. Her research interests include contemporary art, new media, sexualities, and girls' studies. Her work has been published in peer reviewed and edited publications and she has presented research at conferences organized by the College Art Association, Cultural Studies Association, and National Women's Studies Association, among others.

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6.

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